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The Battle of Rhode Island

By

Ex-Governor CHARLES WARREN LIPPITT

A Paper read at a Special Meeting of the Society in the Old State House
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August 29, 1778, in the annals of Rhode Island, is historic. Its memories are dear to the nation as well as to the State. To commemorate the deeds of national heroes links the present with the past and guards the nation's future. To honor patriotic sacrifices inspires similar efforts in later emergencies.

Late in July, 1778, a stately fleet of 12 line-of-battleships and four frigates, containing Count D'Estaing's expedition to aid the Colonial cause, appeared off Newport. Moving majestically forward, they soon anchored, extending from the Narragansett shore to Brenton's Neck, completely closing the harbor. Later three of the frigates advanced to Seaconnet, and their appearance at Fogland Ferry in the East passage caused the British to burn three armed vessels.

July 30, two French ships of the line forced their way by the batteries about Newport and passed on further up the bay, causing the burning of eight and the sinking of 13 British ships.

August 6, eleven of the French ships approached Newport, and under a heavy cannonade passed the town and its batteries. The only British frigate remaining in the harbor and a number of transports were burned in the greatest haste.

In addition to the transports destroyed, the following English ships of war were sunk or burned to prevent their capture by the French; Lark, Orpheus, Juno, Flora, Cerberus, Falcon, and Kingfisher. The French Government allowed prize money at 600 livres per gun carried by all British vessels destroyed, and the total guns captured was 212. At that time a livre was worth two thirds of a dollar and the total in prize money therefore amounted to \$84,800.

It is unnecessary on this occasion to trace the landing of Gen. Sullivan's army on the island of Rhode Island and its subsequent operations to capture Newport; to estimate the propriety of the French effort to join battle with the English fleet off Point Judith; to examine the effects of the furious August gale that wrought such havoc with both fleets and armies; or to determine the necessity of refitting D'Estaing's fleet at Boston, and its abandonment of Sullivan and the Continental Army on Rhode Island.

As an illustration of the influence of sea-power in military operations it is most pertinent. The English holding control of Narragansett Bay, all efforts to capture Newport were futile and could only result in disaster. Rhode Islanders cannot ignore that lesson. The stern necessity of an adequate naval force to protect the extended national domain was never greater. Never before in history has such time been required to create the ships, guns and accessories, necessary for a modern navy, and to instruct the personnel to successfully use modern engines of war on the world's oceans. "To maintain peace be prepared for war."

The absence of D'Estaing and the French fleet in the campaign on Rhode Island gave the English an overwhelming advantage. The separation of the Continental forces from the mainland by wide waterways, and the probability of reinforcements to the English garrison of Newport from New York, supported by an English fleet, constituted a most serious menace. Prudent regard for the safety of the army required the abandon-

ment of the siege until the return of the French fleet, and Gen. Sullivan arranged for the withdrawal of his army from the trenches before Newport.

During the night of August 28th and 29th the Americans effected a most orderly retreat toward the north end of the island, although even then ardent hopes were entertained that upon the reappearance of D'Estaing active siege operations could be resumed.

The main portion of the army encamped on Butt's hill, its right extending to the West, and its left to the East, road, with flanking and covering parties prolonged toward the water on each side of the island.

About three miles south of this position on Windmill hill, in the neighborhood of a cross-road, joining the East and West roads, Col. Henry B. Livingston was posted with a light corps consisting of Col. Jackson's detachment and another from the army. On the West road a second light corps was located, commanded by Col. Laurens, Col. Fleury and Major Talbot. In the rear of these troops the picket of the army was stationed, commanded by Col. Wade. With these arrangements completed Gen. Sullivan confidently awaited the British attack.

Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene commanded the right wing, extending nearly to the western shore of the island. On the extreme right of his position a small redoubt was located to protect the Americans from the flanking fire of any English vessels sailing up the bay from Newport. The command of the left wing of the army was given to Gen. Lafayette. His hurried journey to Boston to hasten the arrival of the French troops rendered it impossible for him to assume its active command during the battle. His anxiety to take part in the conflict caused him to provide relays of horses and to cover the 70 miles to Boston in seven, and the trip back in six and one-half, hours. On his return the retreat across Howland's Ferry was in progress and he was assigned to the command of the rear guard.

The discovery early in the morning of August 29, 1778, that the Americans had abandoned their entrenchments opposite Newport caused Gen. Pigot to hurriedly arrange to harass their retreat. The Hessian Chasseurs and the Anspach regiments of Voit and

Seaboth were ordered to advance northward by the West road, under command of Gen. Losberg. Brig. Gen. Smith, with the 43d and 22d British Regiments, and the flank companies of the 38th and the 54th, marched up the East road in search of the retreating Americans.

The two armies soon came in touch and skirmishing began. The Continentals endeavored to delay as much as possible the advance of the enemy without engaging in a general action. They made repeated stands, checked the British advance, and then retreated to other advantageous positions further north. At times the contest on the West road was severe. Col. Laurens, in command on this highway, vigorously resisted the Hessians.

The British detachment endeavoring to force the East road finally reached the cross-road near the Gibbs place, joining the East and West roads immediately in front of Col. Livingston's position. The possibility of the English utilizing this cross-road had induced Livingston to post his contingent in the field bounding south on the cross-road and easterly on the East road, quite effectually concealed by its high stone walls and the luxuriantly growing grain.

Possibly the sharp firing on the West road caused Col. Campbell to consider the Hessians required assistance. Whatever the reason, half of the Twenty-second British Regiment turned into this by-road. At a favorable moment the Americans from short range fired a fearfully effective volley into the unprotected enemy. The surprise, the falling of the dead and wounded, the attack coming from almost unseen foes, enabled the Americans to load and repeat their volley with equally frightful results, before they retreated. It was claimed that Col. Campbell, afterward Mac-Cullom More, lost in this terrible onslaught fully one-quarter of his regiment.

The two light corps were supported for some time by the picket under Col. Wade. Their successful resistance to the British advance and the heavy firing caused by the different skirmishes, induced Gen. Sullivan to send a regiment to support Col. Livingston and another to the assistance of Col. Laurens.

The Americans made a more persistent stand in the neighborhood of Quaker Hill than was compatible with Gen. Sullivan's

plan of operations. He accordingly sent out one of his aides, Col. John Trumbull, to order the withdrawal of the troops. In carrying the message Trumbull had to ascend the northern slope of Quaker Hill, something more than a mile in length. The conflict was raging near the top of the eminence. As he progressed round shot came bounding on and plowed up the ground in his neighborhood.

He met his friend, Col. Tousard, a member of Lafayette's military family, whose horse had been killed under him. His arm had been blown off by the discharge of a field piece, for the possession of which there had been a sharp struggle, and he was being led to the rear. Congress, subsequently, for his bravery, granted him the rank of Lieutenant Colonel by brevet and a pension of \$30 a month for life.

Trumbull later encountered Capt. Walker of Jackson's regiment, shot through the body by a musket ball, proceeding to the rear, mounted behind a man on horseback. Walker bade the Colonel a melancholy farewell and died of his wound before night.

Soon grapeshot and musket balls thickly dotted Col. Trumbull's path. Urging his horse forward, he quickly reached the summit of the hill and found himself in the midst of the skirmish. Col. Wigglesworth commanded the rear guard and elated with the progress of the engagement, cried out to the Colonel as he saw him approach, "Don't say a word, Trumbull; I know your errand, but don't speak; we will beat them in a moment."

Col. Trumbull called his attention to a body of men crossing obliquely from the West road toward the rear of the guard. Col. Wigglesworth replied, "They are Americans coming to our support."

"No sir, those are Germans; their dress is blue and yellow, not buff; they are moving to intercept your rear," said Col. Trumbull. "Retreat instantly—don't lose a moment or you will be cut off." Col. Wigglesworth reluctantly recognized the situation and withdrew the guard slowly but safely toward the main army.

As Trumbull rode back to report, he met his friend Col. Sherburne of New Hampshire, a fellow volunteer, who was being carried to the rear to have his leg amputated. Sherburne was a

volunteer aide to Gen. Glover, who with his military family was taking breakfast in a house near Quaker Hill, a long mile distant from the skirmish. The firing on the hill becoming heavy and incessant, the General directed Mr. Rufus King, also a volunteer aide, to mount and investigate the conditions.

As Mr. King left the table in obedience to this order Col. Sherburne took his vacant chair, and was hardly seated before a spent cannon ball bounded through the open window, fell upon the floor, rolled toward Sherburne and crushed all the bones of his foot. The ways of Providence are unforeseen. Who can account for the power that saved Mr. King from this terrible misfortune and, without apparent cause, inflicted it upon Colonel Sherburne?

It was to him a lasting mortification, as the poor fellow argued "if this had happened to me in the field, in active duty, the loss of a leg might be borne, but to be condemned through all future life to say, I lost my leg under the breakfast table is too bad."

Equally remarkable were the frequent escapes from almost certain death that the gallant Col. Trumbull experienced in bravely executing the orders of his chief in the momentous circumstances of the battle. A gust of wind blew off his hat and there being no time to dismount, he tied a white handkerchief about his head and continued on duty in this improvised head-gear, as the hat was not recovered until evening. Mounted on a superb bay horse, in a summer dress of nankeen and with his white headdress, he constituted a most conspicuous mark on the field.

Exposed to every danger of the occasion he escaped entirely without injury, a result that caused Gen. Mattoon to write him after the battle, "Your preservation in each of these most daring enterprises I have ever considered little short of a miracle, and a most remarkable interposition of Providence for your safety." Gen. Sullivan also exclaimed on Col. Trumbull's return from conveying the order to Col. Wigglesworth, to retire the rear guard "Your escape has been most wonderful."

The British contingent on the East road finally approached quite near the left wing of the American Army, but after a sharp

action they were repulsed by Gen. Glover and forced to retire to Quaker Hill. Their line of battle was then formed on Quaker, Turkey and Anthony Hills, with its right extending nearly to the eastern and its left to the western, shore of Rhode Island. Between the hills occupied by the English and Butts Hill, with its neighboring eminences already occupied by Gen. Sullivan's army, a valley intervened about a mile wide, somewhat wooded in places, and interspersed with meadows and thickets of copse.

The English ships of war, with several small armed vessels that had arrived within a day or two at Newport, were ordered to take position off the western shore of Rhode Island and flank the right wing of the American Army. Pending the arrival of these vessels the English did not force the fighting. At 9 o'clock a gun on the right of their line gave the signal, which was immediately followed by a general cannonade from both armies.

About ten o'clock, the naval contingent having arrived and opened fire, the British and Hessians on the left of their line charged down the slope of Anthony Hill in great force to capture the redoubt and turn the right wing of the American Army. Gen. Greene commanded at this point, and his men met the enemy with such destructive volleys of musketry that the ground was heaped with their dead and wounded and their order totally disarranged.

The attack was repulsed and the enemy fell back in helpless rout. Responding, however, to the call of their officers, they rallied and after re-arranging their broken lines again advanced to the attack. The day was warm and the hills prevented the breeze from reaching the valley. The heavy uniform of the British infantry and of the Hessian Grenadiers greatly impeded their movements. The Americans met the situation by discarding such garments as interfered with the freedom of their exertions and utilized their weapons to the utmost extent.

The result of the attack was as before. The frantic efforts to turn the American right and to capture the redoubt were met with equal determination to hold the position by the brave men under Gen. Greene. At last, unable to accomplish their object, dazed and bewildered by their losses as well as by the courage and pertinacity of the defence, the enemy was again hurled back and fled up the slopes of Anthony Hill.

During the hours occupied by these events the Light Troops under Col. Livingston, that had retarded the advance of the enemy up the East road in the early morning, had been gaining a much needed rest on the northern slope of Butts Hill. As the enemy for the third time formed to attack the somewhat exhausted right wing that had stood the brunt of the conflict during the day, Col. Livingston with Jackson's regiment was ordered by Gen. Sullivan to pass around the hill and attack the enemy if opportunity offered. Additional troops were ordered to support Gen. Greene.

Two heavy batteries opened fire upon the ships that had enfiladed the American right wing and finally silenced their fire. Gen. Pigot at this point of the battle, observing the danger of defeat, collected his reserves, to aid his partially disheartened forces.

While the battle was raging on the American right, Gen. Lovell with his Massachusetts troops was ordered to engage the British right and rear and gallantly pushed the attack. The reinforcement received enabled Gen. Greene to advance a portion of his forces against his assailants in the meadow, crowding them together and creating considerable confusion. Livingston watched for his opportunity and at the proper time led Jackson's regiment with fixed bayonets against the flank of the already wavering foe.

His fierce attack soon turned the tide of battle and the mass of British and Hessians were driven across the valley, up the slopes of the opposite hills to the entrenchments on their summits. The Americans, closely following the flying enemy, captured Brady's battery as an evidence of their resistless charge and victorious triumph.

All efforts to turn the American right and capture the redoubt having failed, the enemy at about four in the afternoon rested in the entrenchments on Quaker, Turkey and Anthony Hills that they had occupied in the early morning. The conflict was over, the Americans held their position and controlled the field of battle.

Anticipations that the struggle would be renewed the next day, Sunday, were not fulfilled, as both armies were occupied in the burial of the dead and the care of the wounded. Col.

Campbell of the Twenty-second British Regiment asked permission of Gen. Sullivan during the day to seek on the field for his nephew who had been killed by his side, but whose body he could not remove as they were so closely pursued.

At noon, a letter from Gen. Washington was received, stating that Lord Howe had left New York with five thousand men to reinforce Newport. It became known that a fleet was off Block Island, and a letter from Boston announced that Count D'Estaing could not return as soon as was expected. In these circumstances, a retreat to the mainland was unanimously approved.

The difficulty of transporting an army with its baggage across a wide waterway in the face of an enemy of at least equal force was keenly appreciated. An incessant cannonade was maintained throughout the day. Nearly the whole army was employed in fortifying the camp. A large number of tents were pitched in sight of the enemy. The heavy baggage and stores were moved to the rear and ferried to the mainland before night. At dark the tents were struck, the troops with the light baggage retreated, and before midnight the main army had crossed to Tiverton.

“Not a man was left behind nor the smallest article lost.” The sentinels of the opposing armies were only 200 yards apart, yet these movements were successfully executed. Lafayette returned during the retreat from the island and materially assisted its success. Gen. Sullivan's barge was the last to leave the island and his life guard suffered severely from the fire of the enemy.

Side by side with their former masters, in the fierce contest on the right of the American line, fought the recently raised battalion of negro troops, formerly Rhode Island slaves, but freed by their act of enlistment in the service of the Colonies. The General Assembly of Rhode Island compensated their former owners for the loss of these men's services.

This battalion suggested by Gen. Varnum, approved by Gen. Washington, raised and drilled by Col. Christopher Greene, Lieut. Col. Jeremiah Olney, and Maj. Samuel Ward, was posted in a grove in the valley near Gen. Greene's position.

Gen. Sullivan in "After orders, Oct. 30, 1778," states "the Commander-in-Chief thinks that (black) regiment will be entitled to a proper share of the Honors of the day." This is held to be the first time that negroes were formally enlisted and organized in the service of the country.

A British survivor wrote of the attack on the rail fence at the Battle of Bunker Hill.

"Indeed, how could we penetrate it? Most of our Grenadiers and Light Infantry, the moment of presenting themselves, lost three-fourths and many nine-tenths of their men. Some had only eight or nine men in a company left, some only three, four or five."

Gen. Stark, commanding the Americans at this point, relates of the effect of their fire: "The dead lay as thick as sheep in a fold."

Burgoyne, viewing the battle from the entrenchments on Copps Hill, impressed by the awe-inspiring grandeur of the scene, wrote: "The whole was a complication of horror and importance beyond anything it ever came to my lot to be witness to. It was a sight for a young soldier that the longest service may not furnish again."

Observation on Government account of the late battle of Charlestown, published in London Aug. 1, 1775, summing up the results reported: "By this rule the Americans will put the whole army into the grave or hospitals in three or four nights' work and an hour's fire in each morning."

It is also pertinent to repeat the language of Gov. Johnstone in the House of Commons relative to this glorious conflict:

"To a mind who loves to contemplate the glorious spirit of freedom, no spectacle can be more affecting than the action at Bunker's Hill. To see an irregular peasantry, commanded by a physician, inferior in numbers, opposed by every circumstance of cannon and bombs that could terrify timid minds, calmly await the attack of the gallant Howe, leading on the best troops in the world, with an excellent train of artillery, and twice repulsing those very troops, who had often chased the chosen battalions of France, and at last retiring for want of ammunition, but in so respectable a manner that they were not even pursued—who can

reflect on such scenes and not adore the constitution of government which could breed such men."

At Bunker Hill the British lost 1054 and the Americans 449.

In the battle of Rhode Island, the English lost 1023 and the Americans 211.

At Bunker Hill, until the British entered the redoubt, the Americans fought behind entrenchments.

At Butts Hill, the greater part of the fighting was in the open country, where each army had like opportunities of protection.

At Bunker Hill, the third assault was successful, the redoubt captured, and the Americans driven from the field.

At Butts Hill, the third assault was repulsed, and the British driven from the field. The Americans held their position and controlled the field of battle, not only after the fighting but during the whole of the next day, and until they had completed their arrangements to cross to the mainland.

It is gratifying in the final contest in the afternoon of the 29th, that the British and Hessians were driven from the field by an application of that cold steel held to be such an universal dependence of the British Army. It was the fierce bayonet charge of the sturdy yeomen of Jackson's regiment, under Livingston's leadership, and their comrades of the right wing under Gen. Greene's command, that fully satisfied the British fighting desire on that momentous day, and sent them scurrying in helpless flight to their earthworks for protection.

Gen. Greene, writing to Gen. Washington concerning the battle reported: "We soon put the enemy to rout, and I had the pleasure to see them run in worse disorder than they did at the battle of Monmouth."

Lafayette justly characterized the battle of Rhode Island as "The best fought action of the war."

D'Estaing's instructions to refit at Boston were mandatory. There is abundant proof that much as the absence of his fleet was regretted, it was the result of uncontrollable circumstances. Had it been possible for the French to perform their part of the expedition the entire British Army in Newport would have been captured. It was reasonably anticipated that such an event occurring within a year of Burgoyne's capture at Saratoga, would have resulted in terminating the war.

The sound judgment of Washington induced him to confidently entertain that opinion. He wrote concerning the capture of Newport:

“If the garrison of that place, consisting of nearly six thousand men, had been captured, as there was, in appearance at least, a hundred to one in favor of it, it would have given the finishing blow to the British pretensions of sovereignty over this country; and would, I am persuaded, have hastened the departure of the troops in New York as fast as their canvas wings could carry them away.”

Lafayette stated to Zachariah Allen at Providence in 1824: “I believe that this capture would have produced the same decisive result of speedily terminating the American war, as was subsequently accomplished by the capture of nearly the same Army at Yorktown, by the successful co-operation of the French fleet under Count De Grasse, under similar circumstances.”

The object of the expedition was not attained, but conclusive evidence was afforded that Newport could not be permanently held without a garrison sufficiently large to materially interfere with other British military operations.

The termination of this expedition which had opened with such promise of success was attended with unusual hazard. Had Lord Howe with Sir Henry Clinton's forces reached Newport on August 28th or 29th, instead of the 31st, the larger part, if not the whole, of Gen. Sullivan's army would have been captured. The English fleet could easily have controlled the waterways about Rhode Island and prevented the retreat of the American army, whose safety depended on the free use of the passage to the mainland. With this waterway commanded by the English the Americans could only have surrendered or died.

During the last days of August, 1778, a disaster to the Continental cause, largely nullifying the prestige of Burgoyne's capture, was fearfully possible. In such circumstances, that without foreign aid the British were forced within their Newport entrenchments;

that the departure of the French fleet was fully appreciated and its effect upon the resulting situation accepted;

that the retreat to Butts Hill was an eminent success;

that the battle on Rhode Island was a gratifying American victory;

that the masterly retreat to the mainland, across a broad waterway, in the face of an enemy of at least equal magnitude, was conducted without loss;

and finally that the American army was saved and the British army materially injured, redounds to the credit of Gen. Sullivan, his officers, and men.

Popular criticism is not infallible and is often expressed without adequate knowledge of facts. It is possible, however, to quote the highest authority relative to the American and the French campaign against Newport, in which Gen. Washington, in a general order, entirely concurred:

On September 9, 1778, the following resolutions were passed by the Continental Congress:

“Resolved, That the retreat made by Maj. Gen. Sullivan, with the troops under his command, from Rhode Island, was prudent, timely and well conducted, and that Congress highly approves of the same.

“Resolved, That the thanks of Congress be given to Maj. Gen. Sullivan and to the officers and troops under his command, for their fortitude and bravery displayed in the action of August 29, in which they repelled the British forces and maintained the field.

“Resolved, That Congress have a high sense of the patriotic exertions made by the four Eastern States on the late expedition against Rhode Island.

“Resolved, That His Excellency Count D’Estaing hath behaved as a brave and wise officer, and that His Excellency and the officers and men under his command have rendered every benefit to these States which the circumstances and nature of the service would admit of, and are fully entitled to the regards of the friends of America.”

The patriots who fought, bled and died, in this momentous action of the Revolution did not struggle in vain. They and their comrades on many other bloody fields gave us the priceless liberties of the Great Republic. Greater freedom of personal effort under just laws than had theretofore been known, resulting in prosperity that is the wonder of the world.

The admiration of competitors is seldom expressed. America's success, however, has caused our English friends serious reflection. It is certainly not often that a statement so plain and pertinent, so unmistakably inspired by the grandeur of the Great Republic, coming from a recognized authority in the heart of our great competitor, can be quoted. It is gratifying to submit the following statement from the London Daily Telegraph of September 9th, 1903:

"A century ago about 4,000,000 white people lived in the United States, or approximately as many as live at present in Bulgaria. At that time Great Britain had 17,000,000 inhabitants, and in wealth the United States stood in about the same relation to Great Britain as Bulgaria occupies at the present day. Since then the relative position has greatly altered. At present the United States have about 80,000,000 inhabitants, as compared with only 42,000,000 inhabitants of these islands, and the United States are unquestionably the most powerful, the most prosperous, and industrially the most progressive country in the world

"Such progress in power, wealth, and numbers stands unparalleled and unapproached in the history of mankind, and it should afford cause for serious reflection to all who desire to see a similarly splendid development of the British Empire in the future."

Our unequalled heritage impels us to jealously preserve the memory, to faithfully honor the sacrifices, and to glory in the success, of the heroes of the Revolution.

"Death for their country, death for freedom's cause,
The smoke of battle for their honored shroud,
A grateful nation, and the world's applause
Are all they ask as, sinking to their rest,
Their eyes refreshed reopen on the blest."

SOCIETY NOTES

EDITORIAL

The paper which, through the courtesy of Gov. Lippitt, we are enabled to present in this number, is one of which we, as a Society, may well feel proud. Many accounts of the Battle of Rhode Island have been printed, a most interesting one by Mr. Meyer having appeared in a previous copy of the BULLETIN, but we think it safe to say that Gov. Lippitt has exceeded all previous historians in carefulness of preparation and fullness of detail.

We desire to thank the authorities for permitting us to use the Representative Chamber for the two public meetings of the Society, while our new building is in process of erection.

The new building is progressing satisfactorily though when it will be finished is impossible to say, probably in a few weeks. It is now sufficiently advanced to show its proportions and to give assurance of ample space for the Society's work for years to come.

At the regular August meeting of the Society a most interesting address upon Patriotism was delivered by Dr. Nicholas Murray

Butler, President of Columbia University, and the Society takes great pleasure in printing it in a separate pamphlet.

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Com. Arthur Curtiss James has generously agreed to contribute half the necessary amount, and has already paid \$5,000.

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